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ABSTRACT

Familiarity with specific images or sets of images plays a role in a culture's visual heritage. Two questions can be asked about this type of visual literacy: Is this a type of knowledge that is worth building into the formal educational curriculum of our schools? What are the educational implications of visual literacy? There is a three-part educational rationale to these questions. First, knowing about the conventional implications of certain images might make viewers more resistant to the manipulative uses of those images in advertisements or other contexts. Second, specific images, primarily photographs, have been intimately intertwined with the social developments from which they emerged that the teaching of history seems almost inconceivable without some reference to these images. Third, there are some images about which one might want to instruct younger generations because of the role they have played as a reference point in the public life of older generations. Students were informally tested on their familiarity with a number of historical photographs, pictures from ads, and some frequently parodied images. The highest rate of recognition was of the advertising images, followed by the visual parodies, and then the historical images. The results give a sense of the potential for education to raise students' levels of visual literacy, and draws attention to the need for further exploration of the implications of visual literacy. (DGM)

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Visual Literacy and Visual Culture

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Anyone who has read *Mad* magazine has encountered the image of Alfred E. Neuman, whose insouciant features have appeared on so many of the magazine's covers. In 1963, a resident of Auckland, New Zealand, pasted a picture of young Alfred's face on a plain envelope and, with no other indication of the envelope's destination, he dropped it in a local mailbox. His letter was duly delivered to the office of *Mad's* publisher in New York City (Reidenbach, 1991, p. 138).

This incident is a striking example of the broad reach of U.S. visual culture (a phenomenon that some observers have viewed with considerable concern; see Tomlinson, 1991). A study by Dumas (1988) provides a revealing counterexample. As part of a broader investigation of viewers' interpretations of advertising images, Dumas showed Chinese and U.S.-born graduate students a picture of a man in a business suit having breakfast next to a window with a penthouse-level view of a big city. This picture had come from a print ad for a prestigious financial-services firm, but the firm's name and all other text had been removed. The image of a man looking down at a city or a factory from a tall building is a traditional device in U.S. advertising (Marchand, 1985), and Dumas's U.S.-born respondents readily identified the image's implications of wealth and power. However, these implications were much less obvious to the Chinese respondents, many of whose comments focused instead on the reasons why a middle-aged man would be having breakfast alone, without his family.

In opposite ways, both of these examples demonstrate the potential consequences of an intriguing aspect of visual literacy, involving familiarity with specific images or sets of images that have played a role in a particular culture's visual heritage (or, as in the case of *Mad* magazine, a visual heritage that spans many nations and cultures). One way to approach this kind of visual literacy is to ask a pair of practical questions: Is this a type of knowledge that is worth building into the formal educational curriculum of our schools? What are the educational implications of visual literacy in this sense of the word? These are the concerns that motivated the present discussion.

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Educational Rationale

Advertising Awareness

There are at least three reasons why one might want to say yes to the first question posed above. To begin with, there is the possibility that knowing about the conventional implications of certain images might make viewers more resistant to the manipulative uses of those images in advertisements or other contexts. As Dumas's study suggests, educated viewers often find it relatively easy to identify the intentions behind the persuasive images of their own culture. On the other hand, however, there is some evidence that less-educated viewers may be less-conscious of these intentions and may therefore be in a position to benefit from instruction on such matters (Messaris, 1994).

Historical Knowledge

A second reason for encouraging the form of visual literacy being considered here has to do with a rather different category of images, namely, those with a notable historical content. More specifically, it could be argued that certain images, primarily photographs, have been so intimately and significantly intertwined with the social developments from which they emerged that the teaching of history seems almost inconceivable without some reference to these images.

The civil rights marcher being attacked by police dogs; the exhausted woman seeking refuge in a camp for Depression-era migrants; the Vietnamese children fleeing a napalm attack on their village -- these are only a few of the many images which have played significant roles in the evolution of the events which they recorded. That such images should be a part of basic courses in U.S. history seems an unassailable proposition. Furthermore, one could also argue that such images would be worthy candidates for inclusion in the kinds of cultural-literacy lists which various writers have developed in recent years (Hirsch et al., 1993; Simonson and Walker, 1988, pp. 191-200).

Cultural Understanding

Finally, a third argument for including knowledge of specific cultural images in a visual-literacy curriculum is related to the one above but may be somewhat less obvious. There are certain images about which one might want to instruct younger generations because of the role which they have played as a reference point in the public life of older generations. The art of Norman Rockwell may be the best example of this type of image in the U.S. This author's only encounter with Rockwell in an academic setting took place many years ago, in an art history course in college, in which the instructor once got his daily quota of laughs by treating the class to ten minutes of heavy sarcasm at the expense of one of Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers. But it should not be necessary to argue about the relative merits of Rockwell and, say, Jackson Pollock in order to make the point that Rockwell is worth knowing about if one wants to know about his society and his times.

What is at issue is not how accurately Rockwell reflected the "American

character" (which is, in any case, a fictitious entity), nor what effect Rockwell's work may have had on the values of his contemporaries. Rather, Rockwell's distinction can be said to lie in the fact that his work became -- for believers and unbelievers alike -- a common standard against which to measure character and values (see Olson, 1983). Even today, an advertising photographer can speak of capturing a Rockwellian mood in one of his images (a Nikon ad of little leaguers in front of a New England church, photographed by Dewitt Jones [1989]), while debunkers of the mythical past go after their quarry by going after Rockwell.

Going beyond Rockwell, now, an especially interesting manifestation of this process of cultural reflection occurs in the case of certain well-known images which frequently serve as the bases of mass-mediated parodies. In such instances, the original image's power as a frame of reference is expressed directly in visual form, by virtue of the parody. Pride of place among the relatively small number of American images in this category surely belongs to Grant Wood's "American Gothic," which has provided the theme for several generations of variations on the nature of American identity.

In contrast to the works of Norman Rockwell, whose meaning most commentators seem to feel is only too clear, there is an ineffable quality about Wood's attitude towards the subjects of this image, and this quality is also present to some degree in two other frequently parodied U.S. images, James Montgomery Flagg's World-War-I "I Want You" poster, and J.A.M. Whistler's portrait of an elderly woman. The ambivalent note in these images is characteristic of a certain American attitude towards the past and may partly explain why these specific images have attained their unusual status in the national consciousness. Some degree of ambivalence also seems present in Steinberg's famous *New Yorker* cover, whose view of the United States as seen from Manhattan was, for some time, (and may still be) a ready metaphor for American class relationships and regional differences.

Testing Students' Knowledge

In an informal attempt to get some sense of how widespread people's knowledge of such images actually is, the author has recently been conducting informal tests of students' familiarity with a number of historical photographs, as well as pictures extracted from ads and some frequently-parodied images of the kind discussed above. Since the courses in which these tests have been performed all deal specifically with visual communication, the results can probably be taken as an indication of the likely upper limit of this form of visual literacy among the broader college-age population.

Historical Photographs

Among the various historical photographs tested so far, all of which were associated with events which happened before most of the students were born, there were two which had particularly high recognition rates: Walker Evans's 1936 photograph of an Alabama sharecropper's wife and Alfred Eisenstaedt's picture of a sailor kissing a woman on the day on which

the Second World War ended. 83 percent of a class of 29 undergraduates (all U.S.-born) knew that Evans's picture had been taken during the Depression (despite the fact that this photograph is a facial close-up with no obvious signs of poverty or distress), and 73 percent accurately identified the circumstances of the Eisenstaedt picture. The corresponding figures were even higher for U.S.-born graduate students, and, interestingly, even graduate students from other countries had recognition rates of 50 percent or more for these two images.

On the other hand, however, none of the other photographs included in these tests had a recognition rate higher than 50 percent among undergraduates. For example, in contrast to the Eisenstaedt V-J day photograph, only 47 percent were able to give even an approximate description (e.g., a World War II battle) of the correct circumstances in Joe Rosenthal's photograph of the marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima (others thought that the scene had occurred in Vietnam, Korea, or, in one case, the Civil War). Similar recognition rates were also typical of such images as the civil-rights marcher attacked by dogs (several students thought that it was something that had happened in South Africa) or the assassination of Martin Luther King (several thought the people on the balcony in this scene were pointing at something in the sky).

Visual Parodies

In testing students' familiarity with the original sources of mass-mediated parodies, the method employed was to show them a parody and ask them to identify the original image on which it was based. This yardstick has tended to yield relatively high recognition rates for parodies whose original form was itself a mass-mediated image, such as "Uncle Sam," correctly identified as a recruiting poster by 83 percent of undergraduates, or Steinberg's *New Yorker* cover, which 63 percent of undergraduates were able to name as the prototype of a parody in which a different city took the place of New York. It is worth noting that in neither of these two cases could the students have had any substantial familiarity with the actual prototypes of these images, i.e., the poster itself or the magazine cover in its original appearance.

In contrast to parodies based on mass-mediated images, recognition rates tended to be lower for parodies of "high art." For example, only 37 percent recognized the image of Whistler's mother (in an advertising parody which actually contained the words, "A sale to make a mother whistle"). Since the students' exposure to either type of original would typically have come from reproductions, rather than from the original poster, magazine cover, painting, or whatever, differences in accessibility, in and of themselves, are probably not the main reason for these differences in recognition rates.

Advertising Imagery

The relatively high rates of recognition for parodies of images originating in the mass media might lead one to expect similarly high scores for conventional advertising imagery. This expectation has been borne out for some of the advertising images tested so far, but there have been interesting exceptions as well. Only one of the

undergraduates and one of the U.S.-born graduate students failed to give a correct identification of the product most likely to be associated with the image of a cowboy (Marlboro) and a visual montage contrasting "liberated" and "pre-lib" versions of womanhood (Virginia Slims). Recognition of the Marlboro man was also high for international students (75%), although their scores for Virginia Slims were considerably lower (40%). However, certain other well-established conventions of visual advertising received uniformly low recognition rates regardless of the students' backgrounds. For example, only a third of the undergraduates were familiar with the use of parent-child images as a means of promoting investment advice and the selling of insurance. More seriously, fewer than a third of the students in any of the categories indicated familiarity with what is arguably one of the most pernicious of advertising conventions, namely, the association of cigarettes with pristine natural imagery.

Conclusion

The numbers cited above, together with those reviewed earlier in connection with the historical photographs and the visual parodies, give us some sense, perhaps, of the potential scope of any educational efforts to raise students' levels of the type of visual literacy considered in this paper. More generally, the aim of this paper has been to draw attention to this aspect of visual literacy and to encourage further exploration of its implications. Scholarship in visual literacy has been making significant ongoing contributions to our ability to deal with emerging imaging technologies and the visual media of the future (e.g., Beauchamp et al., 1994); but there is also some value in occasionally casting an eye backwards at the traces of the visual culture of the past.

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